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Poems for the Earth System Model

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Magma Poetry

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Selected

Magma Selected highlights a single poet who is emerging or whose work deserves to be better known, allowing us to publish a wider selection of poems. Our Selected Poet for this issue is **Ben Smith**.



Poems for the Earth System Model

These poems came out of discussions with Dr. Lee de Mora, a researcher on the Earth System Model – the climate modelling system that provides the predictive data for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Spinning Up

The way a spinning top achieves stillness
 settling in motion
 parallel to the table's surface

so the model is set running
 and must hold itself steady
 in relation to the world.

This is what is needed for prediction:
 stability
 solidity

numbers held in balance
 with the data
 of the present moment.

But, how to know precisely
 when we've reached
 this point of mirroring,

when each flicker of movement
 is nothing more
 than our own eyes flickering?

Is it now
 or now
 or now?

Carbon Flux

A thought experiment.

Take a breath
and then another
and try to make the second
match the first
exactly
from the expansion
of your diaphragm
to the molecules absorbed
in every one of your alveoli.

The old prophets knew the power of breath
to stoke visions.

How the body's rhythms
could align them deeper to the present
and allow them to slip
between then and now and after
like a hot coal flaring and burning to embers.

But they could not have seen
that we would build machines
to replicate the entire earth's breath –
its atmospheric cycles
and chemical exchanges,
the ocean's carbon flux –

or how these machines would sit in lightless rooms
processors whirring
like iron lungs
like the beating of blood in the ear
working into a trance.

Data Sets

This is the real work of divination:
not grand prophecies
but data gathering.

Every morning the old man is there
paddling slowly out to the mouth of the bay.
He times his movement between the sets
uses the offshore rips, disappearing as he dips
into each trough, dissolving in the spray.

To offer even a hazy glimpse
of a few decades in the future,
the model must be programmed and tested
over hundreds or thousands of years

The way it takes a lifetime to learn
the principles of wave selection:
how the old man knows from the shapes on the horizon
which wave to leave (letting it roll under him
as if a carpet were being lifted)
and which one to turn for.

It is all positioning –
choosing the right place to begin
and then working forward, factoring in
all variables.

As the wave rises like a wall
he balances himself between gravity
and the skyward pull,
matching his body
to the water's increasing gradient

the way one line overlaps another
on a perfect graph, and then
as if shifting its weight
edges on for a few more millimetres

so that, just as the wave lifts him
just as he reaches the green tipping point
he knows how it will break.

Alternate Histories

What I won't think about are the glitches in the system.
The one where, after four hundred years of smooth running,
the ocean disgorged its carbon skywards
like iron filings drawn up by a magnet.

I won't dwell on it.

I won't dwell on the model where a sudden storm
deposited a cloud of sediment
causing a plankton bloom
that fused all the world's water into a stiff, organic paste.

I won't think of that paste,
its texture or smell
(grainy? vegetable?)

and I won't think of that other model
where, after the smallest change
in the initial calculations,
all marine life evaporated
leaving the sea bright as a polished lens.

Instead, I'll look out of my dusty window
at the blue-tit hanging on the back of a fern,
the plum tree teetering on the edge of spring,
and try to find other words for
precarious
 momentary
 imminent

try not to think of the hard drives
filled with terabytes of failed worlds
that never even made it to now.

Ben Smith is a Lecturer in Creative Writing at Plymouth University, specializing in environmental literature, with a particular focus on oceans, waste and the 'Anthropocene'. He is the co-organiser of *Crosscurrents*, an interdisciplinary project bringing together writers and marine scientists. His first pamphlet, ***Sky Burials***, was published by Worple Press and his debut novel, ***Doggerland***, will be published by 4th Estate in April 2019.